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**Transatlantica**
Revue d'études américaines. American Studies Journal

**1 | 2010**
**American Shakespeare / Comic Books**

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**Bart Beaty**

**Édition électronique**
URL : http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/4917
ISSN : 1765-2766

**Éditeur**
AFEA

**Référence électronique**
Bart Beaty, « Interview of Jessica Abel and Matt Madden », *Transatlantica* [En ligne], 1 | 2010, mis en ligne le 20 juillet 2010, consulté le 20 avril 2019. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/4917

Ce document a été généré automatiquement le 20 avril 2019.

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# Interview of Jessica Abel and Matt Madden

Bart Beaty

1 Jessica Abel and Matt Madden are award-winning cartoonists and writers. Ms. Abel is best known for her graphic novel *La Perdida* published by Pantheon in 2006; her most recent comic-strip publication is *Life Sucks* (First Second, 2008), a graphic novel co-written with Dave Soria and illustrated by Warren Pleece. Mr. Madden's *99 Ways to Tell a Story: Exercises in Style* (Chamberlain Bros., 2005) was inspired by Raymond Queneau's *Exercices de Style*. They have recently co-authored a comic art textbook entitled *Drawing Words and Writing Pictures* (First Second, 2008) based on their courses in comic art at New York City's School of Visual Arts.

2 The interview was conducted via Skype on August 21, 2008. The text was transcribed by Bart Beaty and copyedited by Jessica Abel and Matt Madden.

**BEATY:** My first question would be would be to get you to talk a little about the state of comics instruction in the United States—specifically thinking about studio classes, what is the state of comics instruction?

**Abel:** I think it's pretty primitive.

**Madden:** Yeah, it's certainly early. Primitive is probably overstating it, but it's an early stage of development. I mean SVA [School for Visual Arts] and SCAD [Savannah College of Art and Design] and the Minneapolis College of Art and Design are still the only colleges that offer undergraduate degrees in cartooning. And now you have CCS [Center for Cartoon Studies], which has been accredited to give Master's degrees, which is great. But still, that's a very small number of institutions that are giving any kind of real, accredited instruction.

**Abel:** Then you have a lot of one-off classes here and there, but there's no central way of finding out about that.

**BEATY:** At the same time, is there a sense that things are getting better now? That there now exists a handful of programs, whereas a few decades ago there would have only been the one at SVA? Is there a sense that things are growing?

**Abel:** I think so, yes. Anecdotally, a lot of people have talked to us as we've been working on this book about a class that they run or that they want to start, and there's a lot of enthusiasm about that. We've also talked to a lot of people in various departments who don't do comics—I'm talking about art school faculty—but who talk about their students wanting to study comics and they don't quite know what to do or how to handle that.

**Madden:** I've even had that kind of feedback from English department people who are in creative writing, and they're asking about how they can teach comics. I taught a class at Eugene Lang College, which is the New School's undergraduate liberal arts wing, last year, which was half or two-thirds humanities students and one-third illustration students. And then you have people like Isaac Cates who teaches a combination of reading and creating comics under the auspices of the Creative Writing and English program at Long Island University.

**BEATY:** Is it your sense that there are a lot more students interested in this area than can be accommodated right now?

**Abel:** That's why we wrote the book! (laughs) I think that's exactly it. There are not a lot of opportunities for people to study this and there are very, very few qualified teachers, meaning people who make comics but also have some idea about teaching. That combination is pretty rare, and so putting the book together is one way of giving tools to those teachers who might want to create a comics class but who haven't made comics and don't have any ideas about how to teach comics that are useful-like illustration faculty for example. We're trying to put tools in their hands.

**BEATY:** I think one of the interesting things about your book is that you have the three distinctly defined streams—whether you're using the book in a class, on your own or in a group. That's fairly unusual. Most textbooks presume that they're being used in a university or college classroom with an instructor present.

**Abel:** Well comics is a very DIY art form, period. And even more so at this stage of development when classes are hard to come by. People are ready and willing to teach themselves because they know that they're not going to find courses. Most people don't sit down and say "I'm going to teach myself how to make films" because they know that there are classes and that there are places they can go to learn film, but with comics they assume that there aren't.

**BEATY:** What is that your students come in wanting to learn?

**Madden:** That's a good question. It really depends on their backgrounds. In the most general sense it's storytelling. We get a lot of undergraduate students coming in that are into underground stuff, or manga, or superheroes, or whatever. They might draw really well, but for the most part they just fill their sketchbooks full of character designs and all sorts of guns and spaceships and whatever. They consider themselves cartoonists, but it's very rare to find someone who is already very accomplished as a storyteller and who is actually putting those characters into panels and telling stories with them. So in the largest sense, that's what they come in looking for.

**Abel:** And even those who come in thinking that they have a story that they want to tell (although often it winds up being something that they find is not worth putting the

time into), they often have a very hard time completing anything, or getting the story to the point where it's useful. When we give them storytelling assignments they're often really resistant. But even if they don't want to do what we ask them to do because it's hard work, they still understand that this is crucial stuff, and that this is what they need in order to get their vision of their space opera, or whatever, on paper.

**BEATY:** Do they come in with the preconception that this is going to be easy? Let me give you an example. I taught a course last year on European comics in which the students had to write something each week on the book that we had read—*Epileptic*[1], *Persepolis*, something by Joann Sfar, whatever. Some of them started to get bored of doing that every week and wanted to do something more creative, like write a poem or record a song about the book. Finally a few of them decided to do comics based on what they were reading and everyone who tried to do a comic ended up coming in the next week and saying: "That was brutally hard, I'm never doing that again." And my sense was that they all thought that this was going to be a really easy thing for them if they already had some drawing ability.

**Madden:** Yeah, that's something that hadn't occurred to me particularly but you might be on to something. Tom Hart was saying something to me quite recently that every semester his best students, about halfway through the semester, will have a moment where they become overwhelmed and realize: "Wow, comics are really hard!" The more you learn about it the more you realize what there is to it.

**Abel:** The more you want to be good at it and the more you're able to critically look at your own work, the harder it is. The kids who draw all the time aren't going to find it as tough as maybe some of your students who don't draw all of the time and are plunging into it full bore starting from zero. Your students are going to find it hard in that basic way, which of course many of our students find as well. But, there's also an additional level to that: "So you're making comics. Fine. Are they going to be any good? What are you going to make out of this?". That's really a whole other issue. That's what the advanced students end up realizing. They get into it and they wind up thinking, "Wow this is real work!" because to actually do a good job at this and to be who they want to be as a cartoonist, *that* is really hard.

**BEATY:** Do you find it difficult to disabuse them of some of their preconceptions? To break them down and take them to a place that they can find their own voices instead of simply imitating Kirby, or Tezuka, or Crumb, or whomever they might have a strong affinity for?

**Abel:** We don't worry about that too much because comics are so brutally hard that by the end they usually wind up getting to their their own place all on their own.

**BEATY:** Is that a weeding out process?

**Abel:** A little bit. I mean, a lot of our students will not end up being super-original. Not everybody is going to have the unique talent of Joann Sfar or someone like that. And that's okay. There's room for a lot of people who just make comics and don't worry about it too much. But the fact is that even the students who come in who tend to be real copy-cats, when they come in, they're directly copying stuff that they love, but even those kids, within the first year, tend to develop their own style. It may be very influenced by the style that they like but it's not the same thing at all. And I think that's just a matter of making them do a lot of work. So to actually sit down with them and develop a style or to work on originality, that's the work of a second or third year curriculum. It's not beginning stuff. It's not important at that point. All that's important is just making the work.

**BEATY:** Speaking of an upper-year curriculum, your book really goes through a single year or a single term...

**Abel:** Realistically I think it would be a year in a classroom situation, but we know that most classes are only offered over a semester. Our classes are offered for a year. You could do it in a semester, but you'd get a lot more out of it if it were spread out. One of the things that we're going to add on the website is a full-year curriculum where it can be spread out.

**BEATY:** I'm wondering how you approach in your classes the balance between the large- and small-scale issues. At one point in the book you're talking about poetics and story-telling and at others you're giving detailed advice about how to hold a pen to get certain types of lines, or how to use an Ames lettering guide. How do you balance these minute technical discussions with "this is how you conceptualize an entire story structure, or a character and his relationship to other characters" in the classroom? Is it the same way that you do it in the book?

**Madden:** Basically, yes. One example that I like to point out is the assignment for comics with no pictures (p. 95), where we have students do a one-page comic where they can't draw anything—they can only use panel borders, word balloons and thought balloons, sound effects, only the linguistic structure of comics. The assignment occurs at the end of chapters six and seven, which deal with laying out a comics page and lettering: how to make the page the right size, how to decide how wide your gutters should be between the panels, using the Ames lettering guide, all that technical stuff. In one sense it's just a dry run. You're almost doing an empty page just to practice how to lay out the panel borders, learn how to ink a word balloon and how to use a lettering guide. But what I really like about that assignment is that it's also a story-telling assignment and a language assignment. It's about how comics work to tell stories: how many panels are there on the page, where are the word balloons, and how does that create a sense of place or emotion within a story?

**Abel:** The way that we teach advanced concepts in the classroom is to just integrate it into what we're doing anyway.

**Madden:** That's what I'm getting at: in our teaching we're always working at several levels, where we're working on technical nitty-gritty stuff at the same time that they're working on the larger questions about the art of storytelling.

**Abel:** If you're following the book you'll be in the middle of working on the six-page story—which you do throughout the end of the book—there are chapters on technical stuff reminding you how to lay out a page and so on, but in the middle of that it will ask you to pull back and examine what you're doing on a more subtle level.

**BEATY:** When you teach, is that a normal end-of-term project for them? A six-page story that they build to over the course of the semester?

**Abel:** Yeah, in our storytelling class that's what we do. Though the book isn't designed to mirror a class that we teach specifically. It's a more basic class. Because SVA has a degree in comics we are able to teach a class that is more specific to storytelling. A lot of our assignments in that class are very specific about what kind of stories they need to tell but there is an open assignment at the end of the first semester that is essentially the six-page story in the book.

**BEATY:** Do you walk them through the process that seems to be implied by the book, which is starting with the single-panel gag tradition, working to the daily strip and then to the page and then to a longer story?

**Abel:** That's not how we run that class, no. We have used that structure in other contexts.

**Madden:** I've taught a few short classes where I've done that. The New School class that I taught I structured that way. I think it's a useful way to build things up.

**BEATY:** I was struck by the choices that you made in the chapter on single-panel text/image relations, the way that you bring in Pettibon at the end and the way that you mix traditional and non-traditional material is really a very useful way of visualizing and explaining those relationships.

**Madden:** Good, thanks. It's problematic because, you know, at the same time single-panel cartoons are sort of a related but distinct animal. But it's a useful model to use for teaching.

**Abel:** Right, if you put two single-panel cartoons together you don't get a comic strip. But it is a way of thinking in smaller units.

**BEATY:** That brings us around to the theoretical section at the beginning of your book. You offer three definitions of comics—David Kunzle's, Scott McCloud's and Will Eisner's. Where do you see the role of theory in your pedagogy? Is there a place for that kind of theoretical material in what you teach?

**Madden:** In general I would say that studio comics programs, where it's not just a single class but a whole program like at SVA or CCS, some kind of reading and criticism is really important. At SVA, I think all of us would like to incorporate more reading in class, but it's one of those things that never seems to make the final cut because there are so many things to cover.

**Abel:** When introducing comics to students who are just starting, theory really needs to take a back seat. There's not much reason to sit down and talk about "what are comics?", except just to get people talking. It's fun, and it can be a good conversation to have, but it's not going to help you put down a panel. So it's in there, the way that we teach our class, and the way that we do the book, but it's embedded in other stuff. We feel that there will be other places, other classes that are really focused on theory. In any well developed curriculum for comics there should be an art history component that would have that kind of thinking in it.

**BEATY:** There is certainly an implicit form of criticism in your book. You specifically outline the operation of a Tony Millionaire strip, of an E. C. Segar Sunday page and explain how it works, why it works, and what's effective about it. Is it fair to say that criticism, therefore, is more important than theory in teaching comics? Perhaps that comes out of the tradition of critique in studio classes?

**Madden:** I would say that's our point of view, and mine especially, since I wrote a lot of those essays. I have a background writing reviews for *The Comics Journal* and *Bookforum*, and I studied Comparative Literature as an undergrad, so I have studied theory and literary criticism, although it never really stuck with me. Not that I don't think it's useful, but I never found any way to express anything worthwhile with the particular variety of post-structuralism that was in fashion when I was in school. What I've always found much more productive, and what I do in my teaching and in my critiquing and in my book reviewing, is a kind of close reading criticism where I look at the material in front of me and try to figure out how it works and what makes it interesting.

**Abel:** I think you're on to something, Bart, when you say that it has to do with how we teach critiquing artwork. Doing a close reading of Popeye, and seeing how it functions and understanding it through really paying attention to the small details of the strip is going to help you when it comes to looking at your own work or other students' work and analyzing it.

**BEATY:** I think that these critiques are one of the interesting things about your book because it is not the sort of thing that comics criticism and scholarship tend to get into a lot of the time. Scholarly work tends to come from a literary tradition in which English professors talk about the themes in the work of Alan Moore or Neil Gaiman, but we don't have a lot of art historians working in comics.

**Abel:** I think that's a place where we really need to grow.

**BEATY:** I think that kind of attention is really crucial, but I don't see the academic or scholarly side and what you two are doing overlap as much as it probably should.

**Abel:** I just got a big pile of great close reading analyses of *La Perdida* pages from a class of high school students from California. They really just knocked me out. They had read *La Perdida* in class, and their final assignment was to pick a panel or a page and do a really close reading of it, and they were just incredible.

**Madden:** They were visual essays too. The way that they were done was really cool.

**Abel:** Yeah, they took a photocopy of an actual page and pasted it on cardboard and then used arrows to point to things that are happening.

**Madden:** It was really impressive.

**BEATY:** Given that, one of the things that I really liked about your book was the real sense of breadth. So I'm wondering how broad you have to be in order to be an effective teacher of comics? Jessica gives the example of learning story structure from Archie comics, while a lot of people might be dismissive of Archie comics and assume that there's not much to learn from them. To use Archie and Edmond Baudoin as examples, do you see that as a key to successful instruction?

**Abel:** Well, I think that when you're a teacher of comics you have to be really open-minded. You're going to deal with lots of students who have favorites, and you just don't understand why they like them. Aside from anything else, you really have to open your mind about those things and get interested in what your students are interested in so you can help them to do what they want to be doing. You can try to mold them into a different kind of artist than they started out being, but you're going to have very limited success with that, I think. That's the first aspect of it. I think that the second aspect is, you're as well read as you are and whatever your background is, whatever comes to your mind is what you're going to use. People constantly bring up stuff in their classes that I've never read and I think, "that's an amazing example. That's totally perfect. Why didn't I ever think of that?", but there are so many different ways to go about teaching by example.

**BEATY:** At the same time, is there any benefit to being really narrow? Of saying, "This is the way that I've done it and you should approach it that way too?". Is there any benefit to approaching things that way?

**Madden:** I think that it depends on the level a little bit. Drawing Words & Writing Pictures, and most of the classes that we teach are for beginning students who are really just trying to find their way, so I feel like they need to have a really broad view of

things—give them the sort of toolbox and lay out the options for them as artists and as storytellers.

**Abel:** Although, as under-developed artists you also want to give them a lot of rules. In our book we aren't saying "be like us!" but we do say "learn the narrative arc." There is a narrowness to it in some sense.

**Madden:** Right. It's not totally freeform. We always qualify stuff by saying "Ultimately you can do what you want, but this is a baseline set of skills that you need to learn so that you can then jump off from." We're not teaching a particular style of storytelling or drawing. I think that once you're a senior, for a portfolio class, or at a Master's level, it can be useful to butt heads with someone who has an idiosyncratic style and strong opinions about how comics should or should not be made. That could be really challenging and exciting for someone who's ready to broaden their mind, but who also has the strength of character and will to get their own voice out of that and not become a copy.

**Abel:** My teaching philosophy personally is that when students come in and they say that they want to do manga soap-operas, who am I to say no? If that's what they want to do—and they may decide something else in the course of their development, often they do—I'm there to help them do what they envision, and to do it really well, and not take dumb shortcuts and make it really awful. Even if it's really commercial, that's what they want. I'm totally not down with this idea of making people do art comics because I do art comics. I do try to make them think in a deeper way than I think most commercial artists do about what it is that they're doing. And that's as far as I go with it.

**BEATY:** I don't want to have you criticize books that are similar to yours, but I do want to ask you if you think that there are lessons that people can take from Scott McCloud's *Making Comics* or...

**Madden:** There's Ivan's book too [Ivan Brunetti, *Cartooning Philosophy and Practice* (Buenaventura Press, 2007)].

**BEATY:** Ivan's, or, have you seen the Trondheim and Garcia book [Lewis Trondheim & Sergio Garcia, *Bande dessinée: apprendre et comprendre* (Delcourt, 2006)].

**Madden:** Yeah, we have those and I've read about half of it and enjoyed it a lot.

**BEATY:** Do you see a difference between what those people are doing and what you're trying to do?

**Madden:** Yeah, I think that they're quite different. Obviously *Understanding Comics* is a quite different entity because that is more of a critical reading tool. It's certainly useful to an artist but that's not its primary goal. And *Making Comics*, which is much more instructive, the way that *Drawing Words* is, is still structured in a kind of essay format that's not really systematic the way that our book is. I think that is probably the single thing that makes our book unique and different, is that we start from ground zero and work our way up. Ivan's booklet is structured that way too—in fact we got the cumulative structure idea from him—but ours is more detailed and step-by-step.

**Abel:** Ivan's book is great. There are some really great and really generative activities—some writing exercises and thinking exercises in there. But Ivan does have a really specific idea of how things ought to be done. And I think that that part of his book

would be of limited utility to a lot of cartoonists, to a lot of students for whom that's not what they want to be doing. Simplicity is not the goal for everybody.

**Madden:** Well, the proof would be in the pudding there, to see what his students turn out. But that's an example of one of those books that's much more prescriptive than ours.

**Abel:** Students in the classroom I'm sure have a very different treatment than the experience of simply reading the book, but the book is very prescriptive and very specific. It says "do this and work this way". I think it's fine for him to write in the way he wants to, but there are a lot of students who would really chafe at that. He would probably say "fine, chafe away". I think that it's good to have some productive opposition, but to say that if a student wants to draw detailed sci-fi stuff that that's not okay and not comics, to me, that is not an acceptable teaching position. That's me as a teacher. Ivan has every right to teach any way that he feels like.

**BEATY:** I guess that the last question I would have then is where would you like to see the teaching of studio comics go? What do you think it can attain, and what are the steps required to get it where it should ideally be?

**Madden:** Besides the obvious thing that we'd like, which would be for it to expand and for there to be more of it, one thing that I'd like to see happen, although I'm really not sure how it could happen given the way that universities work, is to make comics more cross-disciplinary. I know that's a buzzword in academia but I also know enough about universities to know that it isn't really the case that different departments actually cooperate on stuff. Because comics are this mixture of writing and drawing, storytelling and image-making, I'd really like to see more crossover between fine art, illustration and creative writing programs; for all of them to have a stake in teaching comics.

**Abel:** If not that, at least have creative writing being taught in comics programs. Writing, and thinking in terms of words and how you are going to treat that part of your story, is very under-taught. We don't do it enough in our classes; we don't have time. I do a little bit in my junior class-basic writing exercises. But my students come in unprepared, and they leave basically still unprepared. I mean, I do as much as a I can, but I don't have time to teach a creative writing class on top of everything else.

**BEATY:** I think that's no different from the kind of critical or theoretical courses that I teach —you always end up wanting more of everything.

**Madden:** Yeah, basically.

**BEATY:** I'm offering a course this year, and I offered one last year, where it is the only one at the university. We have thirteen week terms so that means dealing with thirteen books and trying to cover the whole field and history of comics. You start to wonder what you can teach them, and should you focus on just one thing because what can they possibly take away from this? Whereas in our Film program, they're required to take whatever it is— fifteen credits on film, so they can get the breadth but also highly detailed courses on filmmakers or genres or national traditions.

**Abel:** Basically what we need is more programs. We need more full four-year degrees so that students have the room to expand on these topics. As your students figured out, comics are really, really hard, really complicated. There's got to be room in academic programs for taking some time and investigating them.

**Madden:** Also—and I'm not sure how relevant this is to the parameters you're talking about in this issue—I think that adult and continuing education is also a really

important arm of comics education. Because comics is such a haul and a lot of work, a lot of people aren't ready for it until they're older. Not to mention there's a lot of people who are just discovering comics now. I teach a popular continuing ed class at SVA and Jessica and I did a great workshop in Portland at the Pacific Northwest College of Art back in June, and the average age of the students was, what?, early thirties or something?

**Abel:** Something like that.

**Madden:** Ranging from eighteen to sixty. So it's important to give study opportunities to people who aren't undergrads or master's students. And there are also the different sorts of programming that you can do, not just having a fifteen-week class, but an intensive weekend workshop or a distance learning thing. There're a lot of possibilities.

**Abel:** You can learn a lot from those kinds of classes. There's no reason why we couldn't do more short workshops and then send people off on their own. Everybody keeps talking about the fact that comics are traditionally learned independently, and so why not use that strength?

**Madden:** Tom Hart and I are going to do a continuing ed class next semester that will only meet three or four times. We'll meet at the beginning of the semester to set goals but it will basically be a kind of independent study. We'll meet twice to have some critiquing, and then have a final critique, but people will work independently on either short stories, the graphic novels that they're working on, or whatever it is that they're doing. There's a lot of potential in combining the DIY thing with a little bit of coming in from the cold and getting some feedback and guidance.

**BEATY:** Do you think that there's an opportunity right now to expand these things. I'm just amazed about the number of things that are happening now with publishers wanting to get involved in putting out comics, and what the two of you are doing with *Best American Comics* [an annual anthology of contemporary, mostly alternative comics of which Abel and Madden have been series editors since 2008] and so on. Is there a sense that we have to act now or else we'll look back in twenty years and think "Oh, we should have done that when we had the chance in 2008?"

**Madden:** I don't think that it's a bubble in that sense. There's definitely a crest of popularity right now that will die down and there might even be a certain amount of backlash in the popular culture. You already hear people say "I'm tired of hearing people talk about graphic novels all the time". But I also think, and I think that Jessica does too, that there's no turning back at this point. The larger culture has finally latched on to comics at a level where it's going to remain accepted to a degree that's it's never been able to hold on to before.

**Abel:** It's so pervasive now, there're so many structures in place that it's not going to fall apart like it did in the late-1980s, the last time that there was a huge surge like this. Newspapers have created sections and hired staff to cover them, the web is full of sites, there are academic programs and classes starting up. Film is now completely dependent on comics as a source of stories. It just goes on and on. They're now integrated into culture in a way that they haven't been since the 1940s. And realistically, probably even more so.

## NOTES

**1.** English version of *L'Ascension du haut mal* by David B. (6 vols., L'Association, 1996-2004).